Panasonic PV-GS15 Camcorder: how-tos

Panasonic PV-GS15 Camcorder
$499.95
www.panasonic.com/flash.html

If you want to record home videos for editing on your computer, a MiniDV camcorder is the way to go. The Panasonic PV-GS15 is a feature-packed MiniDV cam, and with a street price of around $400, it's an inexpensive, well-rounded camcorder for budget-minded buyers.

The PV-GS15's setup is pretty straightforward. After you charge the battery, insert a MiniDV tape and the included SD (Secure Digital) card. On the back of the cam, you'll see the Power switch and mode dial. To record a movie, flip the Power switch to On and then turn the dial to the movie-camera icon. Within easy reach of your thumb is the Record button; press it to start taping and again to pause.

You can use the viewfinder to frame your shots while recording, but the LCD provides a more convenient view. Flipping open the LCD disables the eyepiece viewfinder and provides access to the camera's main control panel. You can rotate the LCD so you can see it while you shoot from waist level or above your head, or you can turn it around to film yourself.

The camera gets up close and personal with a 24X optical zoom lens. (In 35mm camera terms, that's roughly a 950mm lens.) The W-T switch controls the zoom. The camera offers electronic image stabilization which can help keep the image steady at high zoom levels, but only to some extent. You'll still need a tripod for faraway shots. To enable or disable image stabilization, press the Menu button and use the arrows to select Camera, EIS, and then On or Off.

Right underneath the EIS setting in the menu is the Digital Zoom option. Digital zoom provides magnification of up to 800X but significantly sacrifices image quality in the process. The optical zoom is more than adequate for most recording situations.

There are many buttons on the main control panel, a few of which are essential. The Back Light button increases the exposure to lighten the subject. That's not to be confused with the Light button, which illuminates the small, four-LED lights under the lens and helps illuminate nearby objects in the dark.

An external microphone jack is under the lens. The internal mic has a wind noise reduction feature; to enable or disable it, press Menu and then select Recording, Wind Cut, and On or Off. The microphone increases in directional sensitivity as you zoom in to better pick up far-away sounds.

When you're trying to capture the highlights of your kid's soccer game, you can't

The PV-GS15 has several buttons hidden under the viewfinder door.

keep the camera running all day, but you might miss important shots by waiting for it to turn on. Use the Quick Start button, located near the On/Off switch, to fire up the camcorder quickly. Press it to enable a low-power standby mode. When you turn the camcorder on again, it will be ready to record in just a second and a half.

The camera's automatic focus and exposure are spot-on, but if you prefer to take matters into your own hands, the camera will relinquish control of focus, shutter speed, and aperture adjustments. On the control panel, slide the Auto/Manual switch to Manual and then press the Enter button to adjust these settings.

Hanging In The (White) Balance

Like most camcorders, the PV-GS15 automatically adjusts the white balance. If you don't know what white balance is, you aren't alone.

Different types of light (incandescent, fluorescent, and so on) have different color temperatures. An incandescent light might have a color temperature of 2,850K (Kelvin), which is lower than the 5,500K of midday sun. Without proper white balance, the pictures you take indoors can look reddish, and the noontime outdoor shots can appear bluish.

Automatic white balance tries to correct these differences by guessing the type of light you're using. Because these guesses aren't always perfect, automatic white balance doesn't always eliminate color cast. Most cameras also have a manual white-balance setting. Here's how to adjust the white balance on the PV-GS15.

First, flip the Auto/Manual switch on the main control panel to Manual. Press the Enter button; the letters AWB will appear on the screen. Now press the Left and Right arrow buttons to select a white balance mode. The sun icon indicates outdoor mode, and the light bulb indicates incandescent lighting.

For unusual lighting situations—if there are multiple sources of light, for example—choose the manual lighting icon, which is cryptically indicated by two triangles and a square. Point the camera at a white object and fill the frame with white. Press and hold the Enter button until the icon stops flashing. The white balance is now manually set, and colors in your video will look more natural.

To return to automatic white balance, press the arrow buttons until the AWB icon reappears. Or push the Auto/Manual switch to Auto for full automatic mode. If you move to a different light source and don't switch to Auto or reset the white balance manually, your images will have a distracting red or blue cast.

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